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BRUCE FEIN

# A wise maneuver . . .

President Ronald Reagan has received a torrent of criticism for his decision to facilitate shipments of arms to Iran in exchange for the release of American hostages held by terrorists operating in Lebanon. The criticisms are hollow, exaggerate the potential harm to the foreign policy interests of the United States, and ignore the potential benefits of improved Iranian-U.S. relations in a post-Khomeini era. The president's Iranian gambit is commendable given the unsentimental realities of international life.

Mr. Reagan's arms-for-hostages deal has been assailed for fivefold reasons: it will increase the taking of American hostages by terrorists; it involves negotiations with terrorists which is never acceptable; it will destroy cooperation with our allies in ostracizing terrorist regimes; it will assist an Iranian victory over Iraq in their six-year war, thereby threatening Persian Gulf nations and world oil supplies; and, it was concealed from Cabinet officers and Congress.

The arms-for-hostages swap, however, will not increase the taking of Americans by Middle East terrorists. Those religiously-inspired fanatics do not act rationally in the Western sense of the word. They perform no cost-benefit analysis ala the Office of Management and Budget in deciding whether to take an American hostage. Their motives are enigmatic to Western thought, and are unresponsive to Western material incentives. Middle East terrorists do not take Americans hostage to procure arms. They are abundantly equipped with weapons purchased in a vast and unpoliced international arms market. Fears that the arms-for-hostages trade has increased risk to American civilians are thus unwarranted.

To argue that negotiations with terrorists are unacceptable in principle is to ignore international realities. Negotiations and deals with wicked nations and regimes are time-honored. The United States staunchly and generously supported the Soviet Union during World War II despite Josef Stalin's terrorism

against actual or contrived opponents — a terrorism that yielded grisly corpses. The United States and Britain caused the execution of countless Soviet prisoners of war after World War II by trading them for American and British POWs held in Soviet-controlled territory. And the United States continued negotiations with the Soviets on a spectrum of issues despite Soviet responsibility for 300 deaths caused by its destruction of KAL flight 007. What then is reprehensible about negotiating with terrorists that is different from negotiating with despotic nations or rulers? If net benefits can be garnered for the United States, then negotiations are justified, even with terrorists.

That is the hard-nosed practice of our allies. Their political imperatives dictate their terrorist policies, uninfluenced by the American example. France and Spain rejected entreaties from the United States for overflight rights to attack on Libya in retaliation against Libyan-sponsored terrorism long before the arms-for-hostages swap was revealed. After the revelation, Britain remained adamant in administering and obtaining European Economic Community sanctions against Syria for complicity in a plot to explode an airliner during a flight from London to Tel Aviv. And the French policy of negotiating with Iran to obtain the release of French hostages has been unaltered by Reagan's arms-for-hostages exchange. Indeed, only this week two French hostages were released in part because France took action against opponents of the Iranian regime in Paris and made an initial \$330 million payment to settle a loan dispute with Iran. In sum, the United States policy toward terrorism is extraneous to the actions of our allies.

To obtain freedom for three American hostages since the fall of 1985 — the latest being David Jacobsen who was released in Beirut on Nov. 2 — President Reagan apparently facilitated the transfer to Iran of a modest supply of spare parts for American-built armaments. But such transfers have not affected the Iran-Iraq war. Iraq retains overwhelming superiority in arms. Iran's strength is in manpower and religious zeal. The United States can offset the spare parts transfer by increased arms sales or grants to Persian Gulf allies such as Saudia

Arabia or Oman, which would indirectly aid Iraq. Iraq itself has voiced no military concern over the spare parts shipments to Iran. Thus, the Iran-Iraq war annals will not award even a footnote to the arms-for-hostages trade.

President Reagan planned and executed the Iranian gambit within a tiny component of the National Security Council. He neither informed nor utilized the departments of State or Defense, or the Central Intelligence Agency. If the CIA had been involved, the law would have required the president to notify members of Congress of his negotiating initiative.

The president justifiably acted outside regular bureaucratic channels to avoid leaks and publicity that would destroy any potential for success. That tactic was similarly employed when former National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger secretly negotiated a trip to Communist China by President Richard Nixon.

The Supreme Court recognized a half-century ago in *United States vs. Curtiss-Wright Export Corp.* that in the vast realm of external relations, "with its importance, complicated, delicate, and manifold problems, the president alone has the power to speak or listen as representative of the nations." President Reagan acted fully within constitutional prerogatives in withholding information regarding the Iranian gambit both from Cabinet officials and Congress. The president uniquely is elected to conduct foreign policy of this type.

The substance of Reagan's arms-for-hostages decision is irreproachable. It yielded freedom for three Americans — the Rev. Benjamin Weir, the Rev. Lawrence Jenco, and Mr. Jacobsen. It caused no upsurge in terrorism or hostage-taking. The Iran-Iraq war remains stalemated and U.S.-Iraq relations remain unimpaired. And the arms shipments may help political forces in Iran sympathetic to the United States in the power struggle anticipated after Ayatollah Khomeini dies.

In the risky world of international relations, President Reagan's arms-for-hostages deal was eminently worth the risk. The president deserves applause for his international astuteness.

Bruce Fein is a visiting fellow in constitutional studies at The Heritage Foundation.